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Sent: Sat 1/30/2016 1:36:55 AM
Subject: From Greenwire -- OFFSHORE DRILLING: Interior pauses permitting to study fracking impact to Pacific

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OFFSHORE DRILLING:

Interior pauses permitting to study fracking impact to Pacific

Ellen M. Gilmer, E&E reporter

Published: Friday, January 29, 2016

The Interior Department will spend the next several months studying the impacts of hydraulic fracturing and other forms of well stimulation in the Pacific Ocean, as stipulated by a settlement finalized today with environmentalists.

The agreement comes after months of negotiations between the Center for Biological Diversity, the Environmental Defense Center and Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement.

CBD sued Interior in early 2015, and EDC sued in late 2014, both arguing the agency had rubber-stamped applications for fracking and "acidizing" from offshore platforms off the coast of California. The groups argued that Interior violated the National Environmental Policy Act, Coastal Zone Management Act and Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act, and asked the court to pause drilling while the agency performs an environmental impact statement.

According to the terms of the settlement, finalized today, Interior will perform an environmental assessment, focusing on the impacts of future well stimulation activities from offshore platforms. Existing wells will be unaffected, but the agency will pause permitting on fracking-related applications during the study period.

The agency will complete the study by late May and decide then whether a broader environmental impact statement is merited. CBD reserves the right to challenge that decision. The American Petroleum Institute, an intervenor in the case, said the environmental assessment was unnecessary and that it would challenge the result if necessary.

Environmentalists hailed the settlement as a big step toward understanding the impacts of the popular well stimulation practice.

"This halt to offshore fracking is a huge victory for California's coastal environment," CBD attorney Kristen Monsell said in a statement. "Offshore fracking is a dirty and dangerous practice that has absolutely no place in our ocean. The federal government certainly has no right to give the oil industry free rein to frack offshore at will."

According to CBD, at least 200 wells have been fracked in state and federal waters off Long Beach, Seal Beach, Huntington Beach and the Santa Barbara Channel.

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